

Somalia: Expanding Crisis in the Horn of Africa

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The Current Crisis in Somalia and Threat of Terrorism

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Payne, and members of the committee, my name is Ted Dagne, Specialist in African Affairs at CRS. Let me thank you for inviting me to testify before your committee on this important issue. As you are well aware, the people of Somalia have suffered for over a decade and face an uncertain future. Hundreds of thousands of Somalis have died due to factional fighting, famine, or disease over the past decade. A generation of Somalis are growing up surrounded by violence, poverty, and face a very bleak future. Many Somalis have been internally displaced or forced to flee their country. The most affected by the violence and chaos in Somalia are women and children. Many Somali girls have been raped and violated by the so-called militia.

After years of failed talks, in August 2004, a new Transitional Somali Parliament was inaugurated in Kenya. The 275-member parliament consists of the major political factions and seems to represent all the major clans of Somalia. In October 2004, the Somali Transitional Parliament elected Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed as the new president of Somalia. The swearing in ceremony was attended by 11 heads of government from Africa and representatives from regional organizations and the United Nations.

In November 2004, President Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed appointed Professor Ali Mohamed Gedi as prime minister. The transitional government, however, has not been able to function effectively or move to Mogadishu in large part due to opposition by the warlords in Mogadishu, even though some of these warlords signed the agreement and are ministers in the government. The inability of the transitional government to establish effective control has allowed warlords and clan factions to dominate many parts of Somalia.

Some parts of Somalia are relatively peaceful despite the absence of a functioning central government in Mogadishu. The northwest region of Somalia, for example, is considered by many analysts to be stable and peaceful, with a functioning government. This region, the self-declared "Republic of Somaliland," seceded from the rest of Somalia in 1991, after the collapse of the Siad Barre government. Somaliland has conducted several transparent, multi-party elections. Despite these apparent successes, Somaliland remains unrecognized by the international community.

The recent fighting in Mogadishu between Islamic Courts Union (ICU) forces and the now defunct Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism (ARPCT), reportedly

formed in February 2006, further complicates the political crisis in Somalia, but also represents an important shift in the balance of power in Mogadishu. The so-called Alliance was the creation of well-known warlords in Mogadishu who have been the main source of instability and violence in Somalia. These warlords include Muse Sudi Yalahow, Mohammed Qanyere Afrah, and Omar Finnish.

The recent crisis received unusual international attention in large part due to reported U.S. support for the so-called anti-terror Alliance. The American decision to support the Alliance seems largely driven by longstanding concerns that terrorist individuals and groups have used and continue to use Somalia as transit and a place to hide. Some of the ICU leaders are seen by U.S. officials as being extremists or terrorists. The newly elected leader of the Council of Islamic Courts, Hasan Dahir Aweys, was one of the top leaders of Al-Ittihad and was designated as a terrorist by the Bush Administration. Aweys is dismissive of his designation as a terrorist and contends he is being targeted because of his religion. In a recent interview, Aweys stated that "if strictly following my religion and love for Islam makes me a terrorist, then I will accept the designation."

Sharif Sheik Ahmed, the leader of the Islamic Courts Union, was appointed chairman of the Council's Executive Committee and is expected to lead the day-to-day affairs of the Courts. A number of key players in the Islamic Courts Union were named to key positions, including Omar Imam Abubakar and Abdullahi Ali Afrah. Mr. Muhamoud Sheikh Ibrahim Suleh, a man who reportedly declared a "jihad" against the warlords, was named Secretary General. Some observers have expressed concern that the election of Aweys may push the organization toward a more radical position.

The forces of the Islamic Courts Union expanded areas under their control after the defeat of the warlords in Mogadishu. ICU forces captured the towns of Jowhar and Beledweyne in mid-June 2006. Moreover, for the first time in years, Mogadishu appears relatively peaceful and the Islamic Courts Union seems to have the support of the population in areas it controls. The level of support enjoyed by the ICU is difficult to measure, although the group seems to consist of constituencies from multiple sub-clans and appears to have broad support among Somali women. During the Mogadishu fighting, women supporters of ICU played an important role. The ICU success in Mogadishu effectively led to the collapse of the ARPCT and forced the warlords to flee or join the ICU.

Negotiations between the Transitional Federal Government and the Islamic Courts Union did not lead to a major breakthrough, although the talks ended speculation that the ICU rejects negotiations. In June 2006, the transitional parliament voted in favor of a foreign peacekeeping force. But this move was rejected by some Islamic Courts leaders as being unnecessary and counter-productive. The African Union approved a proposal for Uganda and Sudan to deploy a peacekeeping force to Somalia under the auspices of the Inter-Governmental Authority for Development (IGAD). The deployment did not take place in large part because of the refusal of the United Nations Security Council to remove a United Nations arms embargo on Somalia.

In mid-June, an International Somalia Contact Group, consisting of the United States, Norway, United Kingdom, Sweden, Italy, Tanzania, and the European Union, was formed and

met to discuss the unfolding Somalia crisis. In a press release after its first meeting, the Contact Group stated that “The goal of the International Contact Group will be to encourage positive political developments and engagement with actors inside Somalia to support the implementation of the Transitional Federal Charter and Institutions.” However, many Somalis are skeptical that the international community will help end the crisis. International support after the signing of the agreement in 2004 has been limited and sporadic.

The defeat of the warlords in Mogadishu and renewed international interest in Somalia may offer an opportunity to help establish an effective, all-inclusive central government in Mogadishu. But peace and stability in Somalia are unlikely to occur in the near future, even if Somalis resolve their differences and establish a central government in Mogadishu. Resolving the status of Somaliland likely requires serious negotiations. The role of Somalia’s neighbors, unless focused in support of a peaceful and stable Somalia, will likely continue to contribute to the instability and chaos in the country. If the international community fails to seriously engage and attempt to isolate the new leaders in Mogadishu, they are likely to fight back.

In the view of many Somalis, the threat of international terrorism can not be effectively dealt with without a functioning government in Mogadishu. The options for the United States are limited and success largely depends on how Somalis manage their own affairs. The danger for the United States, however, is being perceived by Somalis as anti-Islam. The label of some Somali groups as terrorists or extremists may have led some in Somalia to reach the conclusion that they are being labeled because of their religion. Somalis are Muslims and secular. No Somali extremist or fundamentalist group has succeeded in dominating the political scene since independence.

The desperation and anger in Somalia may be so entrenched that many Somalis are likely to support and fight for any group that aims or claims to fight for peace and stability. Let me conclude by giving you two examples of how life has changed, perhaps temporarily, for some Mogadishu residents. A friend a few days ago got word from a family member in Mogadishu that for the first time in fifteen years he was able to take his kids for swimming. A Somali woman who sells milk for a living recently told a family member that for the first time she was able to sell her milk without being robbed or paying fees to militia members in Mogadishu. Right now, Somalis are more concerned about the safety and survival of their family than the threat of extremism in their country.